Some Materials for the Social History of the Mississippi Valley in the Nineteenth Century

BY
SOLON J. BUCK

Reprinted from the Proceedings of the
Mississippi Valley Historical
Association, for the year 1910-1911

SOME MATERIALS FOR THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

By Solon J. Buck

The growth of democracy — political, industrial, and intellectual — during the last half century, has been reflected in the field of historiography by a broadening of our ideas as to "What is history". We are no longer content with a treatment of the subject which is confined to the annals of government or the activities of public men; we insist on knowing something about the lives and thoughts and ideals of the people as distinguished from those of the rulers and leaders. To take an example from American history, we are inclined to think that a knowledge of the way in which the American people settled a continent is as essential as a knowledge of the activities of our presidents and congresses. As a result of this tendency, the Germans have taken to writing *culturgeschichte*, and in America Professor McMaster produces a *History of the People of the United States*, while a host of monographic studies dealing with popular institutions, with economic conditions and problems, and with the settlement of particular States or physiographic areas, make their appearance. It is in this broad sense of the history of the people, including their political, economic, intellectual, and religious activities rather than as contrasted with political history that the term "social history" is used in the title of this paper.

If the scope of history is to be thus broadened, a corresponding broadening of the sources from which history is to be written, is necessary. No longer will the

records of government and the papers of public men be sufficient. We must search for the records of the people and devise means by which these records may be studied and presented in such a way as to bring out their significance.

For the political history of the people, the most obvious source is to be found in their votes at elections. And, indeed, a number of scholars have recently demonstrated that valuable conclusions can be reached by a careful study of election statistics, especially by means of mapping the percentages by counties. For this purpose, the first requisite is, of course, a reliable set of statistics, but, unfortunately, few States have seen fit to publish comprehensive election returns, especially for the earlier periods. The historical student has been obliged, therefore, to make use of unofficial, and totally unreliable compilations to be found in such publications as *Niles' Register* and the *Whig* or *Tribune Almanac*. In some States, and presumably in every State of the Mississippi Valley, an official manuscript record of all returns of elections is preserved in the office of the Secretary of State. What better service could our State historical societies and State departments of history perform than to make these statistics available to scholars by the publication of accurate compilations together with maps illustrating all the more important elections? The preparation of such maps involves a very considerable amount of routine labor, but once prepared, the foundations would be laid for a large number of historical studies and future investigators would be saved the necessity of duplicating each other's work.

The value of political statistics and maps depends, however, upon their interpretation and for this purpose a knowledge of the distribution of the population and of the different elements which make it up is essential. Here our principal reliance is the work of the Federal

census which furnishes statistics and maps displaying the distribution of the population at the end of each decade. Although excellent for depicting the general location and movement of population in the country as a whole, for purposes of State and local history the United States census maps are not entirely satisfactory. Since the county is taken as the unit, no distinction is made between settled and unsettled portions of large counties on the frontier, while the location of a large city within a county gives an apparently high density to the whole county. It would be very desirable to have series of population maps prepared for the different States in which the townships or other small divisions should be taken as units. For this purpose, the Federal census might be supplemented in many States by State censuses which would reduce the period between maps to five years. Some States have published more or less elaborate compilations of the returns of their State censuses, but in other States, the census appears to have been taken merely because the State constitution required it, no use being made of the returns. Illinois, for example, had a Territorial census in 1818 to determine if it contained enough people to secure admission to the Union, and State censuses every five years from 1820 to 1845 and every ten years thereafter up to and including 1865; but in general nothing more than the bare totals by counties was published and in some instances not even that much has been found. The original schedules, however, with some serious gaps, have been preserved in the archives of the State and the earliest of these schedules with compilations from the remainder will probably be published by the State Historical Library in the near future. It is possible that a similar situation exists in some of the other States of the Mississippi Valley.

But we want to know more about the people than their mere numbers and location; we want to know who

they are, where they came from, and what are their occupations and characteristics. For such information as this the United States census as published is of little value prior to 1850 when the gathering of information about nativity was first undertaken. The original schedules, however, for the Federal census in the western States from 1820 on are preserved in the Census Bureau at Washington, and by starting with these schedules, which contain the names of heads of families, it is believed that it would be possible to secure information about a sufficiently large proportion of the inhabitants of a district to make possible reliable generalizations as to the nativity, or former residence, of the people of that district in 1820 or 1830 or 1840. The Census Bureau is at present publishing the original schedules of the first Federal census in 1790, so far as they have been preserved. If it is worth while to do that for the eastern States which at that time had been settled communities for many years, certainly it would be worth while to publish these schedules for the States of the Mississippi Valley in 1820 and 1830 when they were in their beginnings. Such a publication would make possible far more systematic studies of the settlement of the Valley or its component parts than have yet appeared.

In gathering information about the nativity of heads of families whose names appear in these early schedules, the original schedules of the census of 1850 would be of great assistance. For those whose names do not appear in 1850 and for information upon other points than nativity, the principal sources are to be found in the records which have been preserved in county archives. The practice of recording and preserving comprehensive vital statistics has only recently begun to make headway in the Mississippi Valley; but a vast amount of information about the people of a county can be gleaned from other records and papers frequently to be found in its

archives, such as poll-books, assessor's rolls, records of transactions in land, and even court papers and records. Unfortunately the preservation of such miscellaneous material as this — aside from the court records — seems to have been pretty much a matter of chance. In some counties very little of the sort is to be found, while in others there are extensive collections, but almost never is this material well arranged, cared for, and made accessible to the historical student. It is high time, indeed, that the condition of county archives in the States of the Mississippi Valley should be brought to the attention of those who are interested in their preservation. Several months ago the opportunity came to me to visit the court houses of fourteen counties in central and southern Illinois and the conditions which this trip disclosed were appalling. Almost invariably the old and little used records and papers were found stored away in attic or basement rooms, frequently all jumbled together in barrels and packing boxes or even on the floor, without order or arrangement, and in imminent danger of being used by the janitor for kindling. The laws of the State of Illinois required copies of the schedules of the State censuses to be filed with the clerks of the circuit courts in each county. In only one of the fourteen counties visited did inquiry and reasonable search lead to the discovery of a single schedule and in that instance its existence was unknown to the officials and its discovery a matter of chance. In another county a lad of sixteen or seventeen years led me to an attic room which contained a few old books and papers scattered about the floor and on the shelves. He informed me that I might look these over but added that I would not be likely to find the census schedules desired because, two years before, when the accumulation in the room had become three or four feet deep upon the floor, he had been ordered to go through it and burn everything which did not appear to be of value. He

frankly admitted that in his estimation, old census schedules would have been worthless and consequently would have been consigned to the flames.

Such a condition of affairs as this seems to be the inevitable concomitant of the American practice of rotation in office and it is probable that the States of the Mississippi Valley will come in time to adopt some system of State supervision over the making and preservation of local records, similar to those which have already been adopted by a few of the New England States. It will take time, however, to bring this about, for the general public, and more particularly the legislators, must first be brought to an appreciation of the value and present condition of these records and the necessity for their preservation. In the meantime, here is a field which the increasing number of local historical societies might cultivate with the assurance of abundant harvests. Let them appoint committees of competent persons to visit the court houses and other depositories of local records, let the condition of these be ascertained and then, if necessary, let pressure be brought to bear upon the officials and governing bodies to induce them to make proper provision for the care of records whose value is primarily historical or else to turn them over to some historical library or State archives department where they will be taken care of. In addition to this, when a suitable person can be found to undertake the work, the society might well provide for the compilation of a detailed inventory of the archives of the county. It would seem, moreover, that the time is fast approaching when our local historical societies, following in the footsteps of their eastern prototypes, should begin the publication of some of the older and more important of the local records.

Invaluable as are our census statistics and maps, they are not the only means by which the story of American expansion can be told. The westward movement has

been primarily an agricultural movement with its basis in the land and as a consequence the record of the occupation of land is an index to that movement. Much has been written upon the general land system of the United States but so far as I know no one has ever attempted to trace step by step the actual taking up of land in any of the States or even in a smaller area. Yet it is certain that there are records in existence by means of which the date of entry of every legal subdivision of the public lands could be obtained and on the basis of this information it would be possible to construct county maps, which might afterwards be consolidated into State maps, showing just what land passed into private hands during each year or each five years or decade as might prove feasible. For the States of the Mississippi Valley in which the greater part of the land was at one time a part of the public domain, the problem of constructing such maps would be fairly simple and most of the information needed could probably be found in the general land office at Washington. Some complications would arise, however, from the extensive grants of land to the States and to railroad companies, for it would be desirable, if possible, to indicate when the land in question passed into the hands of private individuals rather than when it ceased to be a part of the public domain. In order to do this recourse would have to be had to land records preserved in State and county archives, to the records of land grant railroads, or, possibly, to the records preserved in abstract offices.

Thus far in this paper, the material discussed has been mainly in the nature of public records. There are also large masses of private material which have great value for the social history of the Mississippi Valley and a considerable part of which has been very little used by investigators. Ask any student of western history what is the greatest single collection of sources for the

history of the French régime and he will undoubtedly answer — "The Jesuit Relations". But missionary activity in the West did not come to an end with the withdrawal of the Jesuits although its purpose was gradually changed from the redemption of the savages to that of their successors, the frontiersmen. Home missionary and Bible societies were organized by the score in the New England and Middle States during the first decade of the nineteenth century, and each of these organizations hastened to send its agents and missionaries into the western fields to look after the spiritual wants of the frontiersmen and to prevent them from falling into the clutches of rival denominations. Just as the Jesuit fathers sent back relations to their superiors in France, so these agents and missionaries sent back voluminous letters and reports to the organizations under whose auspices they were laboring. Furthermore, just as the relations of the Jesuits are not confined to their religious activities but contain a large amount of general information, so these letters and reports throw a flood of light upon the development and social conditions of the western States and Territories.

Some of these reports have been printed in pamphlet form as, for example, the *Correct View of that Part of the United States which lies West of the Alleghany Mountains with regard to Religion and Morals* by Schermerhorn and Mills, Presbyterian missionaries who made a tour through the West and South in 1812 under the patronage of the Massachusetts and Connecticut missionary societies. Reports and correspondence were also published in the *Home Missionary* and other contemporary papers, but a large amount of such material is still awaiting the investigator in the archives of the American Home Missionary Society in New York City and of other similar organizations. Some assistance in locating material of this sort is furnished by a recent *Inventory of*

Unpublished Material for American Religious History compiled by Professor William H. Allison and published by the Carnegie Institution, although some important collections appear to have been omitted from that work.

Another somewhat similar class of material, which has also been little used, consists of the proceedings, reports, year-books, and other publications of the different religious denominations. Most of this material has been published, though undoubtedly there are unpublished records of value, but the principal obstacle to its use by investigators appears to be the scarcity of anything like comprehensive collections of these publications. It is to be hoped that our State historical societies and libraries are making an effort to collect such material of this sort as falls within their respective provinces.

Among the better known and more widely used sources for social history are the accounts written by travelers and the descriptive matter contained in guide-books and gazetteers. There seems to have been a revival of interest in travels during the last few years and many of the more valuable and interesting of the early ones have been reprinted with helpful annotations. It is probable that this work will continue, for there are certainly many more books of travel which are of sufficient value and sufficient rarity to warrant reprinting, but the great desideratum is a comprehensive bibliography of this sort of material for the Mississippi Valley or better still for the United States as a whole, with annotations which, besides evaluations, should contain definite statements as to what regions are described and when the observations were made. Such a compilation would enable the investigator to find out almost at a glance what travels he would need to consult, whether the limits of his field be geographical or chronological or both.

That public opinion has been a very powerful force in American life is generally conceded and most writers

on American history have given it due consideration. But it is far from being an easy matter to determine just what was the prevailing opinion of the people of any particular class or section or of the majority of the people as a whole upon a great many important questions. On some questions, of course, the voting part of the population has had an opportunity to express its opinions by the ballot, but it is seldom that the issue has been so clear and unmixed with other matters as to make the actual significance of the votes cast a certainty. Many other problems, moreover, and sometimes very important ones, which have engaged the attention of the people, have never been involved in elections. Recourse must be had, therefore, to a variety of sources among which the most extensive and in some ways the most satisfactory is an institution which is itself a powerful moulder of public opinion — the newspaper.

Never considered a satisfactory source for the events of history, the newspaper is slowly coming into its own as a source wherein the historian can find reflected, in the editorial columns, in communications from the people, and to a certain extent in the general tone and character of the news articles, the opinions, sentiments, and aspirations of the people. Unfortunately the general failure to comprehend that the commonplaces of the present will be the history of the future and the smallness of the amount of valuable material in proportion to bulk have prevented the preservation of files of more than a small proportion of the newspapers published. One who has seen the extensive collections belonging to such institutions as the Library of Congress and the Wisconsin Historical Society might be inclined to doubt this statement but an examination of a bibliography of newspapers recently issued by the Illinois State Historical Library would quickly convince him of its truth so far as Illinois is concerned at least, and it is not probable that the situation is very

much better in the other States of the Mississippi Valley.

It is doubtful if files or even so much as single copies of a single issue of half of the three thousand newspapers published in Illinois prior to 1880 are now preserved in all the public libraries of the United States. Some files, of course, are to be found in the offices of papers which are still published but these are far from being so extensive as one would suppose. Of all the issues of all these papers, it is probable that copies of not more than two per cent are known to be in existence. To be sure, the files which have been preserved and are accessible to students in our public libraries are of the more important papers but the minor papers are also of great value for local history and as reflectors of the opinions of people in the country districts. Many of these papers have undoubtedly passed into oblivion, but let us waste no time in crying over spilt milk. Many others are still in existence, stored away in closets or attics where they are subject to the ravages of mice and flames and the still more destructive house-cleaning. Let us hope that our local historical societies will bestir themselves (most of the State societies are already doing all in their power) and gather in as many of these files as possible. It would also be well to keep an eye on files in newspaper offices with a view to securing them whenever opportunity may offer. Only a few months ago the death of a veteran editor of Illinois was followed by the wanton destruction of a long file of his newspaper which he had carefully preserved.

The last class of material which I wish to consider is that composed of the family papers, letters, and diaries of common people who have never occupied any public positions of importance. Unfortunately, the idea seems to prevail that private letters and papers are of value or interest only to the immediate family of the persons concerned unless these persons happen to be men who have

achieved distinction in politics. The student of social history, however, will frequently be able to draw information of great value about the ordinary life and experiences of the people and about the opinions of ordinary people upon questions of state, from just such material as this. It has been my privilege recently to examine several collections of old private letters and, though finding much that was trivial and of no general interest, I was struck by the large amount of really valuable material which they contained. Especially interesting was a collection of letters to and from a young surgeon who served with one of the Illinois regiments in the Civil War. Here were reflected the pleasures and hardships of the common soldiers in camp and in battle; the daily life, the interests, and anxieties of friends and connections who remained at home; and finally the opinions of both classes on knotty points connected with the conduct of the war such as the treatment accorded to Vallandingham, the policy of emancipation, and the enlistment of negro soldiers.

Fifty years ago the average individual received few letters but such as were received were generally long, carefully written, and devoted in large part to matters of public interest. As a consequence, they were much more likely to be preserved than are the more numerous friendly letters of the present time. Many are the old homesteads in whose attics can be found boxes or trunks filled with such letters and with diaries and other papers. As time goes on and the individuals concerned pass away, there is frequently no good reason why such material as this should not be deposited in historical libraries where it will be arranged, preserved, and made accessible to investigators. Most of it, of course, is not worth publishing; much, probably, is not even worth calendaring; but all of it is worth preserving, and the exigencies of Amer-

ican life are such that it stands little chance of permanent preservation if it remains in private hands.

It is obvious that the mere preliminary work, collecting and preparing the material, for a social history of the Mississippi Valley will not be accomplished in a year or in a decade. There is so much to be done and its character is so varied that there is room for all the workers and all the institutions which are now in the field or can be attracted to it. I can not do better in conclusion than to quote a translation of the words with which Professor Lamprecht ended his paper on the *Historical Development and Present Character of the Science of History* at the International Congress of Arts and Sciences in St. Louis. "One thing" he said, "has been determined by these reflections — that the modern science of history has opened up for itself a vastly greater field of endeavor and conflict and that it will require thousands of diligent workers and creative minds to open up its rich and in many respects unknown regions, and to cultivate them successfully."